WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An image processing apparatus comprising:

input means for inputting image information;

determination means for determining whether an input image contains a mark indicative of a specific image;

setting means for setting allowable time necessary for the determination to be made by said determination means; and

control means for terminating determination processing by said determination means in a case where it cannot be determined whether the input image contains the mark indicative of a specific image within the allowable time set by said setting means.

2. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said determination means executes determination processing whenever precision of sampling of the input image is raised in stages and, if the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image, suspends subsequent determination processing at the prevailing stage of sampling precision.

3. The apparatus according to claim 2, wherein sampling precision of said determination means narrows, in stages, intervals at which the input image is

sampled.

4.   The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said
determination means executes determination processing
5   whenever determination precision is raised in stages by
increasing a number of quantization bits of the image
data in stages and, if the mark indicative of a specific
image is contained in the input image, suspends
subsequent determination processing at the prevailing
10   stage of determination precision.

5.   The apparatus according to claim 2, wherein a
threshold value for determining in said determination
means whether the mark indicative of a specific image is
15   contained in the input image is provided for each stage
of precision.

6.   The apparatus according to claim 1, further
comprising output means for outputting the image, which
20   has been input by said input means, to printing means;
    wherein said output means outputs the input image
in a case where the mark indicative of a specific image
is not detected in the input image within the allowable
time.

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7.   The apparatus according to claim 5, wherein a period

of time which satisfies the following relation is set as the allowable time:

$$Tav \leq (M-H)/m$$

where H represents time needed to construct an output image by said output means, M represents a critical time at which the printing operation by said printing means attains a waiting state in which said printing means stands by for reception of data, m represents number of times determination processing is executed by said determination means, and Tav represents the allowable time per determination processing.

8.   The apparatus according to claim 6, wherein output by said output means is suspended in a case where said determination means determines that the mark indicative of a specific image is contained in the input image.

9.   The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the allowable time is dynamically variable.

10.   The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the mark indicative of a specific image includes a watermark.

11.   A host computer incorporating the image processing apparatus set forth in claim 1.

12.   A printing apparatus incorporating the image
processing apparatus set forth in claim 1.

5   13.   An image processing method comprising:
        an input step of inputting image information;
        a determination step of determining whether an
image obtained by subsampling the input image contains a
mark indicative of a specific image;
10   a setting step of setting allowable time necessary
for the determination to be made at said determination
step; and
        a control step of terminating determination
processing at said determination step in a case where it
15   cannot be determined whether the input image contains
the mark indicative of a specific image within the
allowable time set at said setting means.

14.   A storage medium storing program code capable of
20   being read in and executed by a computer, comprising:
        program code of an input step of inputting image
information;
        program code of a determination step of determining
whether an image obtained by subsampling the input image
25   contains a mark indicative of a specific image;
        program code of a setting step of setting allowable

time necessary for the determination to be made at said determination step; and

program code of a control step of terminating determination processing at said determination step in a

5   case where it cannot be determined whether the input image contains the mark indicative of a specific image within the allowable time set at said setting means.

15.   The storage medium according to claim 14, wherein a

10   program constituted by the program code of each of said steps is a printer-driver program.